

Media Self-Presentation and Identity Exploration of Generation Z During the Waithood Phase

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Abstract. Against the dual backdrop of digital transformation and social structural transformation, Generation Z youth are experiencing institutional delays in transitioning from the education system to the labor market, giving rise to the epoch-characteristic “waithood” phenomenon. This study integrates perspectives from communication and sociology to focus on how Generation Z youth in the waithood phase utilize new media platforms (such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu) for self-presentation and identity exploration. Waithood is a buffer period transitioning students into independent social roles, characterized by suspended identity and social pressure. Employing qualitative content analysis and case study methods, this research examines characteristic multimodal practices (including but not limited to ‘slow living’ vlogs and daily life documentation) across these platforms from 2022 to 2025. The findings demonstrate how platform algorithms systematically curate information flows to simultaneously enable fragmented self-expression and sustain networked interactions, thus creating conditions for ongoing negotiations of identity construction and social positioning. The research enriches theories of digital self-presentation and community identity, deepens understanding of youth psychological support mechanisms and online cultural governance in digital media environments, and provides empirical support for related policy-making.

Keywords: Generation Z, waithood, new media, self-presentation, identity exploration

1. Introduction

With the pervasive penetration of digital technologies, Generation Z—the digital native cohort—displays distinct multimodal characteristics in media use and self-expression [1-2]. They employ digital platforms not merely to construct multifaceted virtual identities, but strategically navigate algorithm-driven recommendation systems to negotiate the dialectical tension between curated ‘ideal self’ presentation and authentic ‘real self’ disclosure [3]. From a communication perspective, new media adjusts social interaction and identity construction through fragmented information flows and highly interactive platform mechanisms [4]. Sociology focuses on the identity suspension phenomenon during the waithood phase—an identity crisis and community belonging need arising in the transition between education, employment, and economic independence [5]. This research uses the “slow life” and “daily recording” content on Douyin and Xiaohongshu as empirical bases,

blending communication algorithm theory and the sociology of weak tie communities to explore how Generation Z pursues identity exploration through self-presentation in digital media. The findings address critical gaps in understanding youth identity formation during socioeconomic waitthood, advancing theoretical frameworks for digital identity studies while providing evidence-based recommendations for platform governance and youth digital wellbeing policies.

2. Self-presentation of Generation Z in digital media

As digital natives, Generation Z demonstrates remarkable engagement on algorithmically-curated social platforms such as Douyin (TikTok China) and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), where their media consumption and production behaviors are systematically shaped by fragmented information flows orchestrated through proprietary recommendation systems. The information flow model in communication theory emphasizes that user-generated content is intelligently filtered, recombined, and pushed by algorithms, affecting users' visibility and interaction [6]. This mechanism prompts Generation Z to frequently update their self-image through multimodal forms such as short videos, images with text, and live streaming, focusing on themes like "slow life" and "daily recording," reflecting a lifestyle resisting the fast pace of society [1]. The Douyin platform's built-in creative toolkit (e.g., beauty filters, viral soundtracks, and template-based editing) facilitates what Curran identify as 'calculated authenticity', a dynamic negotiation between users' actual self-presentation and algorithmically-rewarded idealized personas, mediated through platform-specific affordances [4]. Communication theory suggests that this multimodal transmission strategy not only reflects the evolution of information expression technologies but also embodies the complex process of fragmented and reconstructing identities in the new media environment [7].

It should be noted that the identities constructed by Generation Z on these platforms are not simply authentic reflections but are products of performance. This is well explained by dramaturgy theory, first proposed by sociologist Erving Goffman [8]. Goffman likens social interaction to theatrical performance, where individuals manage their self-presentation to influence how others perceive them. The theory's core is that people perform differently depending on context, presenting a polished "front stage" persona aligned with social expectations, while their true or less guarded self exists in the "back stage." A representative case involves Douyin creators producing 'slow living' content: through meticulous visual composition, soundtrack selection, and narrative editing, they construct an idealized lifestyle narrative that systematically excludes mundane or discordant elements. Such online self-presentation is therefore a "performed" self, shaped consciously or unconsciously to gain social approval within the platform's algorithmic and social environment.

Simultaneously, community interaction theory reminds us that feedback loops in interactive digital media environments become vital forces influencing self-presentation [9]. Likes, comments, and shares form a new type of social capital, making young users more sensitive to external validation. Research shows this reliance can lead to social media anxiety and performance pressure, especially pronounced among young people whose identities remain unstable during waitthood [2,4]. This phenomenon reveals the dual nature of digital media: it grants youth enormous freedom of expression while also creating identity anxiety and social risks.

3. Identity exploration of Generation Z in digital media

Sociological theories regarding waitthood highlight that youth face multiple challenges in transitional periods involving education, employment, and economic independence, marked by high role uncertainty [5]. The platform architectures of Douyin and Xiaohongshu foster digital communities

where ephemeral content production and value-based curation collectively constitute affective infrastructures for identity validation [10]. Weak tie theory explains how small interest- and lifestyle-based clusters facilitate the negotiation and integration of multiple identities among youth [11]. Xiaohongshu communities centered around beauty, travel, and emotional sharing have become digital spaces where youth seek “mirrored selves” and a sense of belonging, helping to alleviate identity confusion [12]. From a communication perspective, gamified interaction theory further explains how Douyin’s challenges, topic tags, and interactive live mechanisms activate diverse identity expressions [13]. Key opinion leaders (KOLs) play a central role in shaping youth group identity paradigms, not only showcasing their personal lives but also acting as cultural guides influencing group values [14].

However, it is critical to recognize that despite digital media's potential to ease anxieties during waithood, it can also intensify identity uncertainty in Generation Z. Quantitative social feedback—such as the number of likes, comments, and shares—has become a primary metric for evaluating one’s social worth and identity value online. This metricization of social worth engenders engagement anxiety—a compulsive need to gamify self-presentation for algorithmic rewards. In response, many users engage in “over-performance,” carefully crafting and amplifying their digital personas to maximize engagement metrics. Ironically, this cycle often leads to a loss of authenticity, as self-presentations become increasingly performative and detached from real-life identities. Furthermore, the blurred boundaries between offline and online selves introduce instability to digital identities, which amplifies the opacity and unpredictability of platform algorithms. This can trigger “digital wandering,” where young users struggle to maintain consistent self-representation amid shifting recommendation logics and social expectations. Consequently, this dialectical tension underscores both the empowering potential and the psychological pitfalls of digital engagement for youth identity formation during waithood, calling for nuanced understanding and targeted support.

4. Recommendations for supporting Generation Z’s self-expression and identity recognition

A healthy digital ecosystem is foundational to safeguarding Generation Z's psychological and identity well-being. Consistent with calls for algorithmic transparency, platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu should enhance content moderation and algorithmic explainability efforts to combat misinformation and cyberbullying, ensuring user privacy and safety of expression [10]. Concurrently, widespread media literacy initiatives must be promoted to equip youth with critical skills for discerning and producing digital content, enabling them to resist “like anxiety” and information overload [9].

From the sociological perspective, constructing digital psychological support systems that address emotional needs and foster community belonging and peer mutual aid is vital [3]. Enabling Generation Z’s active participation in platform governance and rule-making not only builds their self-regulation capacities but also contributes to cultivating healthier digital cultures [15]. Creating diverse and inclusive spaces for expression further supports the negotiation of multiple identities, mitigates waithood-related identity dilemmas, and facilitates social integration.

Practically speaking, mental health advocacy campaigns spearheaded by key opinion leaders (KOLs) have yielded measurable psychosocial benefits [16]. For example, Douyin influencer “李子柒” (Li Ziqi), renowned for her pastoral lifestyle videos, partnered with mental health experts to launch a series titled “Real Talk on Waithood,” featuring raw testimonials about navigating career limbo, resisting social comparison traps, and reconstructing self-worth metrics. Similarly, Xiaohongshu fashion influencer “Tony老师” (Mr. Bags) organized interactive livestream sessions focusing on coping with societal pressures around success and appearance standards in waithood.

These activities invited participation from followers to candidly share their struggles, thus normalizing mental health discourse. By fostering peer support networks and open conversations, such initiatives work toward destigmatizing psychological stress and strengthening community resilience. This model exemplifies how KOL-led engagements can play pivotal roles in supporting healthy identity construction and emotional well-being for Generation Z within digital spaces.

5. Conclusion

This study integrates communication and sociological perspectives to systematically analyze the multimodal self-presentation and identity exploration of Generation Z during the waithood stage on digital new media platforms Douyin and Xiaohongshu. Based on qualitative and case studies of "slow life" and "daily recording" content from 2022 to 2025, it reveals how algorithmically driven information flows promote fragmented expression and digital community interaction, becoming key channels for youth identity construction. While digital media offers freedom and diversity of expression, it also triggers privacy concerns and psychological anxiety, embodying the dual characteristics of digital platforms. Emotional support communities and opinion leaders strengthen identity recognition and promote dynamic negotiation of multiple identities. The research enriches theories on digital self-presentation and community, highlighting the importance of algorithmic transparency, content regulation, and psychological support system construction to foster a healthy digital cultural ecosystem. Future research may expand platforms and methodologies, incorporating cross-cultural perspectives to further explore the dynamic shifts of digital identities. The findings offer grounded insights for developing (a) youth-oriented digital well-being interventions and (b) evidence-based platform governance policies, particularly regarding identity support systems during extended waithood periods.

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